

DIVERSITY AND ETHICS - PRINCIPLES OF A MODERN SOCIETY

A commentary on *Parashat Noach*

By Joe Boxer

This Torah *Parasha* features two appearances of divine intervention due to the acts of man, the flood and the story of the tower of Bavel. The story of the flood stems from the ethical failings of Mankind: *“And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord repented that He had made man upon the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, both man, and beast, and creeping things, and the birds of the air, for I repent that I have made them”.* (*Bereshit*

Noah teaches us that we need to embrace a diverse society, yet we need to protect everyone who lives within those societies

6:5-7). As a result, G-d responds in two ways: first, through the destruction of humanity and second, through the construction of the Noahide Laws – a set of

universal moral policies set to preserve the social order of the world.

The second narrative of this *Parasha* is somewhat more subtle. Mankind unites in Bavel to build a tower reaching up to the heavens. In response, G-d does not destroy mankind but merely disperses them, in both geography and language. Our sages argue over what the cause of this divine punishment was, and explanations range from Bavel launching a holy war upon G-d to a general mistreatment displayed at Bavel.

The Netziv¹ picks up on a particular line in the narrative, *“Now the whole world had one language and one speech”* (*Bereshit* 11:1) and claims that the total unity displayed in this instance is a direct

contravention of the biblical imperative from the creation story of, *“be fruitful and multiple and fill the land.”* The Netziv claims that by uniting under this *“one speech,”* the people were not dispersing and were not filling the world as G-d intended.

For the Netziv and other authors such as the Abarbanel, Bavel had developed into a totalitarian state, where diversity and difference were frowned upon. Bavel’s desperation to unite under a completely united society led to the fear of the outsider and the punishment of divergence. The contemporary author Rav Ezra Bick writes that *“the Midrashim are clarifying for us the CONSEQUENCES (rather than the causes of) the unitary state. The psychological need for unity, the social pressure involved, the strength and power that result from this unity, all will result in the monolithically totalitarian state, which will result in both civil repression (as in the furnace of Avraham) and spiritual hubris (as in the idolatry reaching up to heaven with a sword).”* As a result of this, G-d forced Humankind to be culturally and geographically diverse.

The two stories of the *Parashat Noach* are laying out expectations for a modern society. On the one hand, we have the cultural diversity desired by the Bavel story, for without diversity we have totalitarianism. We then have the ethical living and corrupt free desires of the flood story. The Noahide Laws include universal ethics such as do not murder and do not steal, as well as animal rights laws and the requirement to set up fair and just courts. Noah teaches us that we need to embrace a diverse society, yet we need to protect everyone who lives within those societies.

1. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin was a 19th Century European author. Most of his works came out from his time as the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin in Lithuania

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